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ABSTRACT

A method of teaching English syntax to non-native speakers concentrates on the use of visuals and other audiovisual materials. Traditional methods of English instruction have not been successful with immigrant children and examples of alternative approaches are suggested. (RL)

Imitative Writing
JOSIE LEVINE

Immigrant children, generally, still fail to meet the demands made on their written English, and suffer educationally (and socially) for it. They never do justice to their real ability, are disheartened, and we, their teachers, are at a loss to know what to do to help them.

From the very best of motives, we have tried to teach them with the methods used for native children, and have failed. At best the work the children produce is quaint, at worst it is written in totally unacceptable English. Obviously this situation must not be allowed to continue.

The first thing to do is to accept the fact that people who are not native speakers of English cannot be taught successfully if they are treated as though they were. Having done this we can then take the second step of accepting that foreign learners have to be taught to write English and its variety of styles through the techniques of controlled writing and guided composition. One of these methods is imitative writing.

The idea is simple, and the beauty of it lies in the fact that it is applicable to all learners, from the beginner who has just learned to copy accurately, to the advanced student. It is this: the children need to learn to write acceptable English in a number of styles, so we give them examples of acceptable English to imitate - not to copy, but the examples are there before them for guidance. (If you find it difficult to believe that you can learn this way, think back to the time when you learned to write a formal invitation, or write up your science experiments, or made a parody of a play or a poem. Wasn't that imitative writing, and didn't you learn about its style that way?)

At the very first stage, the text should be accompanied by a picture. These can be cut from magazines, etc. or be brought by the pupils, and the teacher writes a few sentences suitable to the language control level of the children. The example below was accompanied by a picture of a teacher talking to a group of children in a painting lesson. The work is handed to them in a double page work folder. They read the text, then do some 'comprehension' exercises before reading the text again and imitating it with another subject in mind.

The work sheet would contain five activities for the children to do in a double page spread, thus:

PAGE ONE

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. <u>Read</u> This is a school.
This is a woman.
She is a teacher.
These are boys.
It is not an English lesson.</p> | <p>It is a painting lesson.
This is a table.
Those are brushes.
Those are pictures.</p> |
|---|---|

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>2. <u>Draw</u> three boys.
<u>Write</u> a sentence.</p> | <p>3. <u>Draw</u> one teacher.
<u>Write</u> a sentence.</p> |
|--|---|

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PAGE TWO

4. Answer these questions
1. Is this a school?
 2. Is the woman a teacher?
 3. Are those pencils?
 4. Are those brushes?
 5. Is it an English lesson?

5. Read the story in number 1. again.
Write some sentences about the classroom.

Here is the first sentence:

This is a classroom.

The first sentence should always be given at this stage. Here is an example of a child's work:

This is a classroom.	It is an English lesson.
This is a man.	This is a desk.
He is a teacher.	These are crayons.
These are boys.	These are work cards.
It is not a Maths lesson.	

They do lots of these regularly, the scope widening as their language experience and oral control increase.

Unfortunately there isn't space here to work through all the steps that might be taken in this form of exercise. Nor is there room to deal with each stage of language control, even if we could pre-determine them. However the following example may help to illustrate how the same kind of descriptive work from a picture might develop.

Text The picture shows a beach by the sea. Three children are watching some men carry a boy out of the water. The boy is dead. He was swimming in the sea when he got cramp and could not swim back to the shore. There are three deck chairs in the picture. In one of them is an old man. He is sleeping and does not know about the boy's drowning. The boy's mother has seen the boy. She is crying and has her face in her hands. The sun is shining. It is a fine day. *

A child writing about another accident:

The picture shows a road accident near some traffic lights.
 A crowd of people are watching two policemen carrying a woman to an ambulance. The woman is dead. She rushed into the road and was hit by a car. There are three cars in the road on the other side. In one of them is an old man. He didn't

* Bickley, V., Methold, K., Systematic Composition. Twentieth Century English Series. U.L.P. 1966. p.95.

see the accident. The woman's friend has seen the accident. She is crying, and has her face in her hands. The sun is shining. It is a fine day.

In certain cases the children could be asked to draw the picture they are going to write about. This drawing activity could be part of the same kind of procedure that the children follow at Stage 1. - of reading, drawing, sentence writing, answering questions, and finally re-writing. It is worth noting however, that as this form of writing is guided, i.e. with the model in front of him the child may concentrate on content even while he is practising the form, he might be safely left to use only words to record the picture in his mind.

How do the children know what to substitute for what when they do their re-writing? The answer again is a simple one. They know what to do, because, from the beginning, they are taught what to do, in such a way that they see before their very eyes, as it were, what may substitute for or represent what.

The children have cards which may be built up into sentences of the same structural pattern, (if these cards are flock backed or made of blotting paper, so much the better, as the flannel graph is the ideal aid for this particular lesson). Let us take as our example the pattern which is represented by the following sentence:

<u>Column 1.</u>	<u>Column 2.</u>	<u>Column 3.</u>	<u>Column 4.</u>
He	is coming	to Bristol	on Friday.

The cards which they have will be representative of the variety of lexical items or phrases which fit into each of the columns. For example, the cards which will go into column 1 can be all the pronouns, or the names of people, or noun phrases, cards for column 2 will have singular and plural forms of the verb as well as different tenses, and other items such as 'going', 'travelling', 'staying', 'moving'; there will be other place prepositions: 'from', 'in', etc; other place names; other prepositional phrases of time.

You ask the children, 'Who's got a column 1 card?' 'What is it?' It might be 'She', but it could just as well be 'My friend's Aunt and Uncle'. The child comes out and puts it in the right place on the flannel-graph. The children then have to decide what they are going to have the 'subject' doing, to find the correct form of the verb, and having done this, choose direction, place and time of the activity.

The sentence is built up before their eyes. They have the opportunity to 'weigh' the words. They can see that grammatically speaking, (without you ever having to mention the word 'grammar'), 'My friend's Aunt and Uncle' is the same as 'They'; 'They' the same as 'She'; 'She' the same as 'Kulworth Kaur'. That, for example, all the forms of the verb 'to be' are the same kind of words, as are words like 'to', 'from', 'in' etc. In fact they learn a considerable amount about word-classes in English, and if we start them off with this sort of work at the stage when they start their education in the written mode of the language, they do not seem to have difficulty in appreciating what to substitute for what in their imitative writing later on. It is as if they have grasped something intuitively, by different means but almost in the manner that native speakers do.

At every level the control is gradually decreased, so that, for example the

beginner who has done a lot of practice of the type of sentences demanded in the Stage 1. type of exercise may ultimately be given a picture and asked to write about it. His practice has been such that he carries the pattern of the prose within him: he knows how to start, continue and finish, he knows the grammatical words from having written them over and over again, and he can easily ask for any new nouns that he needs.

Here is an example of how control may be lessened in another style that our children need to be able to handle, that suitable for describing a series of actions.

Text Jack gets up at seven o'clock in the morning.

His father calls him if he doesn't wake up. He
washes his hands and face and dresses himself.
Then he has breakfast. After breakfast he goes
to school on his bike.

When the style has been practised by being re-written - for instance another child doing something else at a different time of day - and after further class discussion about what they generally do after school, the children can write a paragraph of five sentences about one of their classmates. This involves them interviewing each other and organizing their sentences round the style structure words: e.g.

Salwan Khan His He
Then he After

When he can write about a consecutive series of actions with no guidance then he has mastered another written skill.

There are many other forms of written English that the immigrant child in the secondary school needs to be able to handle if he is even to begin to do justice to his potential, and I hope to deal with some of them in a later issue.

The pupil is not the only one to benefit from approaching the learning of written English in this way. The teacher undoubtedly benefits as much. Certainly time has to go into the making of the cards, the writing and/or selecting of the texts suitable for imitation, and the teacher has undoubtedly to teach the material, but the light marking load and the greater success of the pupils (you and they no longer discouragingly confronted with work covered in red marks or uncorrected because of the vast number of mistakes) are more than enough to compensate for this. Have a go! It's worth it for you and for them.